

February 14, 2011

The Honorable Alberta Darling
317 East, State Capitol
P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882

The Honorable Robin Vos
Room 309 East, State Capitol
P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Senator Darling and Representative Vos:

I am writing today to express my opposition to some provisions in the proposed Budget Adjustment Bill that I firmly believe undermine the ability of our school districts, and our state, to succeed in the face of mounting challenges.

Growing up in Plymouth, I learned that Wisconsinites are good, hard-working people that come together in difficult times. Having spent 30 years as an educator in places like Tomah, Oakfield, Oshkosh, Verona, and Madison, I know this remains true today.

We need to make tough decisions, but we must be careful not to abandon fairness and a sense of decency in the name of boldness. Strong measures are needed, but we are better served by reasonable reforms than by radical reactions.

Many of us recognize that changes in the public employee benefits structure are necessary, given the difficult economy. However, we should enact changes strategically to minimize harm to our local economies and working families. Together, we can tackle these problems and grow our economy without doing permanent harm to long-standing rights or undermining the Wisconsin Idea.

Public employees have been and will continue to do their part to move Wisconsin forward and help balance the budget. Despite furloughs and freezes, public employees have provided vital public services with fewer people, over longer hours, and for less money.

While change is necessary, the proposed bill will translate into an immediate salary cut of up to ten percent. Hastily enacting such significant salary cuts will take money out of the local economy and could jeopardize our fragile recovery, especially in rural areas. In order to minimize the economic harm, the legislature could enact some benefit changes immediately, while phasing in others during the next biennial budget.

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Alarming, the collective bargaining changes simply go too far, are not necessary for balancing the budget, and should not be included in this bill. This is a divisive and blunt method to deal with perceived imbalances in bargaining.

This bill will shatter relationships among educators and school leaders, undermining current innovations around teacher compensation, evaluation, and improvement. It will have a chilling effect on teacher recruitment and sends a terrible message about the value of public service. Moreover, these changes will disproportionately hurt our lowest-wage workers, who often provide vital services, such as child care, elder care, and special education support.

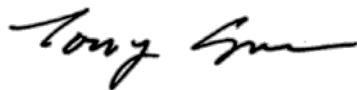
Teachers have a great deal to offer our public schools and should be part of the solutions that move us forward, bringing a vital perspective on classroom, school, and district issues. There is a difference between balancing the rights of management and employees and silencing the voices of the hard-working employees who are in our classrooms teaching students.

These efforts will hurt our classrooms, our kids, and the people who educate them. I have been at the negotiating table as a superintendent, and I know that working together and remaining focused on the kids is the surest path to success.

Unfortunately, this bill is but the first step in a drastic transformation of our state. I fear this is only the beginning with cuts to wages and benefits soon followed by drastic reduction in school aids. Years of revenue controls and recent state aid cuts have harmed rural and low-spending districts, and it is disingenuous to continue asking schools to do more with less while expecting the same results. In the globally competitive 21st century, we cannot allow our commitment to education falter.

The legislature needs to make changes to this bill. It is possible to balance the needs of working families, the local economy, and the rights of workers with the challenges in the state's budget. I urge our elected officials to move forward without eliminating the long-standing rights of state and local workers, particularly the voices in our schools of teachers and education support staff. Together, we can take care of today's budget deficit without permanently harming our public schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tony Evers", with a stylized, flowing script.

Tony Evers, PhD
State Superintendent

TE/mjp

c: Members, Joint Committee on Finance
Governor Scott Walker